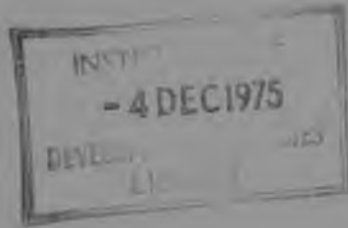




**INSTITUTE OF ADULT EDUCATION
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**No. 4: The Role of Local
Government in Nation
Building**

Joe K. Ansere

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THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NATION BUILDING

BY J.K. ANSERE

Local Government has suffered a great deal of neglect, not only in the academic circles of this country, but also in government circles and among the public generally. In most cases, it has been treated as if it does not really exist, or that it is not important. A lot of this neglect is actually due to ignorance about the theory and practice of local government, and this in turn is due to the paucity of written material on the subject. I would blame the academics for this, in the main.

Let me cite some instances where the subject of local government has been neglected. As far as I can remember, in the last ten long years there have been only two occasions that the subject has been included in the public lecture programme of the Institute of Adult Education. And in fact local government was not originally included in the programme of the 21st New Year School. It came in only because the lecturer that had been chosen for some other subject could not in the end meet his promise. So that but for this accident, local government would have continued in oblivion. Another instance is the decision of the School of Administration here at the University not to accept any more students for the local government course, at least for the time being. This has been done to meet the financial problems facing the University. I would accept that when one is financially hard pressed, one has to cut down on one's expenditure. The question is, why should it be local government and not any other course?

General Disinterest

This is part of the general disinterest in, and ignorance of, local government. And, specifically, how does the Department of Political Science of the University of Ghana

itself stand in all this? The department is no less blame-worthy than the others. Although local government is taught to some extent in this department, it is a fact that it is made to take a back seat in the whole programme of the department.

We shall in this paper first try to settle the controversial question as to what local government is; secondly, to trace its historical development in this country, drawing the necessary conclusions. We would then tackle the main problem of what the role of local government should be and what in fact it has been in our own country. Finally, we shall go into some of the problems of local government in Ghana. Many of our references will be about Ghana, which is the situation best known to the author. Nevertheless many of the problems to be discussed could apply in varying degrees of validity to other African countries.

The term "local government" is not easy to define. The story is told of a delegate at one Colonial Office conference on local government, who complained bitterly about the confusion into which other delegates at the conference had thrown him because they had used the term "local government" in as many as seven different ways. He was greatly exasperated when at the end of all that, he still did not know what local government really meant! The delegates at the World Congress of the International Political Science Association held in Rome in 1958 could not come to a decision as to what local government meant either. In 1959 the delegates at the international Union of Local Authorities Congress held in Berlin set aside a special Afro-Asian day for the purpose of seeking an agreed definition of local government for use in Africa and Asia. They too failed!

Different Meanings

The reason for the difficulty in finding an agreed definition of this term arises from the fact that local government means different things to different people. We can, however, identify two main types of local government systems. At one

extreme is the "Local Authority", which enjoys a large measure of autonomy, or local self-government. Local government in this sense is a system whereby the local citizens are given legal authority to run their own affairs. They elect their own representatives, who then become the policy-makers or law-makers as far as that particular locality is concerned. The citizens, through their representatives, appoint their own officials to administer the policies made by their councillors. Over these local authorities the central government has only a general supervisory power, and the day-to-day administration of the area is not subject to detailed control by the central government. The British local government system is the clearest example of this type.

At the other extreme are countries which have no local government in the sense we have described above, but in which local administration is handled by the central government. In Africa, the clearest examples are Ethiopia and Somalia, where the entire expenditure of local administration is born by the central government. In between these extreme cases (or near-extreme cases with respect to the first type) there are local authorities which lean towards one extreme or the other.

It is difficult to say which type the Ghana system is. But one can say that up to 1961 Ghana local government was more like the British system, buttressed by the principles of democracy, representation, devolution and responsibility. Since that date, however, it has undergone a metamorphosis, becoming more party-political than anything else. Discounting the system that operated during the N. L. C. regime (because it was interim), we may say that the local government system proposed by the 3rd Report of the Electoral Commission and accepted by the Busia government is more like the second type than the first. As far as I can discern, the proposed system is more concerned with the efficient administration of public services in the localities than in affording the local people an opportunity to exercise their democratic right through local government. In other words, there is less

emphasis on the words, "local" and "government", and more on "efficient" and "administration", as is evidenced in part by the decision to change the name of the Ministry of Local Government to that of Ministry of Local Administration. I shall say more about this later.

One other way of defining the term local government is by reference to two sets of principles, namely, decentralization and devolution on the one hand, and deconcentration and delegation on the other. A decentralized and devolved system of local government involves the shedding of substantial authority and power to the local authorities, while a deconcentrated and delegated system involves a mere dispersal of central government officials to the localities. The proposed structure is supposed to be a decentralised and devolved one, but this is so more in an administrative sense than in a political one.

A Chequered History

Now for the history. Local government in this country has had a rather chequered history. The Coussey Report of 1949, which culminated in the Local Government Ordinance of 1951, advocated a democratic type of local government as a reaction against the undemocratic local government system that existed before this date under the traditional authorities and the system of Indirect Rule. The Local Government Ordinance of 1951 withdrew recognition from the traditional authorities and the colonial District Officer as agents of local administration and development, and vested responsibility for these in elected councils.

Because the need then was democratic and representative government, not much attention was paid to the efficiency and economic viability of the local authorities established at the time. There were too many small local authorities which soon became administratively feeble and financially unsound. It took only five years to realise that a new local government system was needed. Upon the recommendations of the Greenwood Commission in 1957, the number of local authorities was reduced from 282 to 70, through amalgamations of small

authorities into larger ones. Greenwood was more concerned with an efficient local government system, not so much with democracy and with the principle of community of interest which had governed the thinking of Coussey.

In four years, that is, by 1961, it was again realized that the Greenwood system too would not do. The local authorities set up in response to his recommendations were soon seen to be too large to command the interest and support of the citizens. On the recommendations of Regional and District Commissioners therefore the government under the 1st Republic increased the number of local authorities from 70 to 183. Now with the decentralization policy the trend is towards larger units again, with the emphasis on efficiency and economic viability. In many ways, the new system is Greenwood resurrected.

It would thus be observed that the whole history of local government in this country has been an unsuccessful attempt to find the right kind of balance between democracy and efficiency. It is my contention that the frequency with which the system has been fundamentally changed is one of the main causes of the difficulties now facing local government today. It appears that after every four years the people of Ghana must expect a change of system or structure in local government. And this is not the mark of a serious people.

National Integration

Having said all this, let me now go on to deal with the question of what the role of local government in a developing country such as ours is: that it should promote national integration. One feature of African countries is the heterogeneous nature of their populations. Most of our so-called "nations" are agglomerations of tribal and ethnic groups. Many of them have been brought together only by accidents of history and not by natural development or by any deliberate decision on their part to merge as one nation. Most African "nations" therefore contain within themselves potentially divisive forces. In many African countries, family and tribal

ties seem to be stronger than national feeling. This threat of national unity is greatly diminished, if not altogether removed, by the establishment of strong local government system. It does this by providing a lawful outlet for the pursuit of local interests. It is of course true that the machinery of local government can be used for destructive purposes - as all good institutions can in fact be so used! But it is also true that, if properly organised and harnessed, local government is the best means of taking into account the interests of minorities and of drawing them into the broader framework of national unity.

Because local government is close (or should be close) to the people, it can provide an effective medium for keeping the public adequately informed and consulted on government policies and actions. This is one side of the coin, as it were. The other side is that local government provides an opportunity for the people to express their reactions - favourable or unfavourable - to government policies. Thus aware of the people's views, the central government can formulate policies which are likely to secure the people's consent and support. Governments in this country, without exception, have failed to take sufficient advantage of this opportunity. Government in the sense of the wielding of power has been too concentrated at the top here, and has not percolated down the society. Several of the grandiose plans of the old regime, as of other African governments, failed because of the total lack or the insufficient involvement of the people in the planning.

It cannot be repeated too often that a healthy and active democracy demands popular interest and participation at the grassroots. The whole business of government becomes a mere academic exercise if there is no effective means of informing the public not only about what the government is doing but also about what it intends to do. In a situation in which literacy rates are very low (Ghana 20%, Somaliland under 5%), it is not much use relying only on the conventional mass media - the press, the radio and television.

Although the coverage of these media in Ghana is much wider than what it is in some other African countries, it is nevertheless not adequate. There are still many people, especially in the rural areas - and about 75% of our population lives in the rural areas - who have no access to these things. But even if people can use radio and TV to inform themselves about government activities, they do not have opportunity to discuss what they hear. Especially where the press and other organs of public opinion are weak, and in some cases non-existent, local government is an invaluable link between the whole nation and its parts. Being a link between the nation and its parts, or between the centre and the localities, local government can promote understanding between communities, a feeling of interdependence and therefore a sense of national unity and common purpose.

Sensitive To Public Opinion

Local government has an advantage over central government, in that through the former the people can exercise a close control over the execution of policies. The local government official is more vividly aware of his public accountability, and thus becomes much more sensitive to public opinion than the central government official. The local government officer has his master on his doorsteps. A lot of the corruption that we do often hear of in local government service is due to the fact that the local government official is much more exposed and more easily detected, rather than that he is intrinsically more corrupt than the central government official.

Local government affords the best means for brining the opportunity for public service within the reach of every citizen. Appeals made by local government authorities are more likely to achieve the desired result than those made by central government institutions. Voluntarism is more enduring and more genuine when it starts from below than from the top, i.e. when it starts from the people themselves than when they are asked by the central government to offer it. Once you

ask for it you have already taken away a great chunk of the voluntary element. Local government can help engender this spontaneous voluntarism.

Local government affords the best training ground for the practice of democracy. It affords the people the chance of learning the art of debate. It helps them to learn how to choose good people to represent them. As Lucy Mair said in her book, Representative Government as a Problem of Social Change, "representative local government enables local electors to learn to recognise the specious demagogue, since it is hard for him to deceive them on familiar ground". Local government provides a major support for the whole democratic system. When people come to understand the intricacies of local problems they are better equipped to understand the task of national government.

In the field of administration, local government helps to relieve congestion at the centre. By so doing it enables the central government to devote its scarce attention and resources to the more important and more complex national issues. This is necessary in the 20th century, when governments are having quite a lot to do in the fields of economic planning, welfare services and international relations. One of the reasons for the success of the British government is that it is very little concerned with local administration, most of which has been devolved to local government. The new proposals for the reform of local government in this country purport to relieve the central government of the detailed administration of the localities. But in providing for the institution to do this, the authorities have established institutions that in all but name are central government institutions. The recent decision to designate the Chairmen of Regional Committees of Administration as Regional Chief Executives will make the system not only a central government system but, what is worse, a party-political system because the incumbents are party-political appointees.

The Economic Role

On the economic side, everyone agrees that local government has an invaluable part to play. It assists in building up the infrastructural base which is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of economic development plans. By the provision of infrastructural conditions such as feeder roads, schools, post offices and the like, local government helps to open up the country, and thus facilitates the mobility of factors of production. Because much of the provision of these services is funded out of local taxation and sometimes out of self-help, local government helps to relieve the central government of some of the financial burden for the administration of the country. These activities together are a welcome addition to capital formation in the country.

Local government has a further role to play in the economic sphere. In a situation where the state is carrying out fast economic development, as most developing countries are wont to do, local government helps to accelerate the pace at which the people are prepared to go with the government. Local authorities do this by explaining the rationale behind the development plans and interesting the people in the goals that are envisaged. It is increasingly recognised that social and economic development programmes are likely to proceed more rapidly and smoothly if they enjoy the active participation and interest of the populace. Our own Robert Gardiner recognised this fact when during the 6th Inter-African Public Administration Seminar held at Greenhill, Accra, in November, 1967, he had this to say: "The needs of development and planning demand wide popular participation. One of the most promising ways to secure this is through effective and imaginative local administration". He should have gone on to suggest what type of effective and imaginative local administration we should have, because this is the problem.

Local government helps to remove the conditions that make for the growth of autocratic and authoritarian government, as well as excessive bureaucratization. By providing local amenities, local government helps to avoid the need of the central government trying to do everything for the people,

especially if it is doing so inadequately. It avoids paternalism, which in the final analysis does more harm than good to the development of nationhood.

In the purely personal sense local government helps create stable personalities. We as individual persons are increasingly faced with problems of the mass society. All major units of social organisation are increasingly becoming bigger, and man as a member of society is becoming insignificant. Business houses, schools, political parties, trade unions, towns, hospitals and even New Year Schools are all becoming bigger in size. Taken together, all this development must have a not too favourable psychological impact on the individual. There is a tendency on the part of the individuals to feel lost in the crowd, to experience a sense of helplessness in the face of ever increasing social pressures, to lose interest in community problems, indeed to lose the sense of responsibility for one's own actions. In short, a dangerous possibility can develop - if in fact it has not already developed - for the individual to become alienated from society as a whole.

Breaking Down the Barriers

The problem already exists in the developed world, and it is fast spreading to the developing areas of the world. This is the main reason why so much support is now being given all over the world to youth organisations and other cultural, social and recreational ventures, in an attempt to counteract this danger. Local government, as the smallest and most approachable unit in public administration, can play a useful role in breaking down the barriers between the individual and society. Local government can show concern and respect for the individual in a manner and to a degree which central government cannot do. In a situation of rapid economic and social change, as has been the characteristic of independent African countries, local government provides the legal and administrative machinery to absorb the shocks of change with a minimum of dislocation in the everyday life of the individual.

The situation described above is the ideal one. In other words, the functions I have described above are those which local government ought to perform, but we all know that there

is a world of difference between what ought to be and what in fact is; between, that is, theory and practice. The broad purposes of local government, such as the association of the local people with the carrying-out of important services, the creation of opportunity for popular participation in economic development, and the like, are recognised; but the fundamental question is, to what extent has local government in Ghana done these things? One realises that the explanation of exactly what local government has been able to achieve is a more rewarding exercise. And the most satisfactory manner to deal with the problem is to take a census of all the activities of local authorities of all sizes from, say, 1951, to the present day, and assess their individual or combined contribution to the social, political and economic development of the country. But in view of the smallness of space, only a rather partial treatment of this aspect of the subject can be attempted here.

We must be fair and say that local government has made some contribution to the development of Ghana so far. Much of what we have today in the form of development and national unity has been due in no small measure to the work that local authorities have done in the past. Of the many achievements of that past, the general improvement in communications, particularly in roads and bridges, is one of the most outstanding. The central government has been responsible for the construction and maintenance of trunk roads, while the construction and maintenance of feeder roads and bridges has been the responsibility of the local authorities generally, with financial aid from the central government but in many cases with locally collected taxes and voluntary communal labour.

Massive Problems Still

Local authorities in Ghana have also been shouldering considerable responsibility with respect to pre-secondary education, aided of course by grants from the central government. But for the effort of the local authorities, the expansion in educational provision that took place under the 1st Republic

would have been impossible. Local authorities have done some useful work in the field of public health too. They have been responsible for the local environmental health services such as clinics, dispensaries, maternity homes, and so on. They have been responsible for the provision of water supply in the villages and towns, and their contribution in this field has added substantially to the service provided by the Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation. And most of the markets and lorry parks have been built and maintained by our local authorities

It is true that some things have been done by local authorities, but they are not enough, qualitatively or quantitatively. Many areas are still undeveloped; we still have massive problems with respect to nation-building. Tribalism is not dead; when it gets the opportunity it rears its head (or shall we say its ugly head?). The distance between the governors and the governed, the rulers and the subjects, is still wide. And there is an increasing number of individuals who are feeling alienated.

If local government has not done sufficiently, it must be because of certain limiting factors, which students of the subject in particular and politics generally must seek to find and understand. I have alluded to many of these factors in what I have said before. They range from our rather insufficient understanding and appreciation of the purpose of local government, frequent and unimaginative changes in the structure of local government in this country, unhelpful government policies, the sheer growth in the needs of the populace, down to financial inadequacies. There is not much time to discuss these, but I would like to single out the question of finance for treatment. I have selected this because many of the other problems impinge on it. Financial inadequacy is the root cause of all the problems facing local government and, for that matter, other organisations. To understand the nature of this particular problem and to find a solution to it will take us very far in the solution of many other problems of local government.

The basic financial problem facing local authorities is the persistent imbalance between revenue and expenditure. They constantly live in a situation where expenditure is rising in excess of revenue not only in absolute terms but, what is more important, in relative terms; that is to say, the rate of growth in the expenditure of many local authorities is higher than the rate of growth in their revenues. This is an unhealthy financial position. A good financial position for any organisation interested in survival should be one in which the level of revenue as well as the rate of growth in the revenue far exceeds that of the expenditure, or at least where the relative levels and rates of growth in both revenue and expenditure are equal. In calculating the level and the rate of growth in the revenue, I have included grants obtained from the central government. If we exclude this from the total revenue we shall be left with a lot less total revenue. If we compare this lesser total revenue with the high level of expenditure, the problem becomes compounded.

Few Sources of Revenue

One of the causes of the low level of revenue is the restricted base of local taxation. The sources of revenue open to the local authorities are too few, and the yield from each of these few sources is too small and in many cases too unstable. The yield is small and unstable because the machinery of collection is weak, and some of what is collected goes down the drain. It was noticed in an investigation the writer made on the Accra-Tema City Council that in 1963/64 the revenue actually collected from the General Rate (property tax) constituted only 34% of the potential revenue which ought to have been collected. Of the total revenue to be collected from the Basic Rate only 54% was in fact so collected in that year.

Another cause is unhelpful central government action and policies. Especially from 1960 onwards the central government had consistently been in the habit of falling in arrears with respect to the payment of its contributions in lieu of rates,

as specified in Section 105 of the Local Government Act of 1961. This defaulting by the central government upset the budgets of local councils very badly, and should bear a large part of the responsibility for the persistent deficits suffered by the latter.

The decision of the Nkrumah Government to tax property also did great harm to the financial well-being of local councils. The decision has now been rescinded, but while it applied, it had the effect of over-burdening the rate-payers, most of whom chose to honour their obligations to the central government while refusing to pay their rates to the local councils. The retention by the central government of certain taxes which ought to have gone to the local authorities is another factor. Cases in point are motor licences (or at least part thereof), fees collected from liquor and firearms, and court fees in respect of breaches against local authority bye-laws. Local authorities have thus been robbed of a substantial part of their revenues. We must add the inability of the central government to honour regularly its obligation to give grants to the local authorities for certain services. I say "obligation" because many of the services for which the grants are given have been imposed by the central government and are therefore national in nature.

It would also be useful to explain the causes of increase in the total expenditure on services provided by local authorities. The first cause is of course the growth in population. Ghana is said to have one of the most rapidly growing populations in the world. This has been at the rate of 2.5 or 2.6% per year, which by international standards is very high indeed. The main cause for this level of growth rate is excess of births over deaths, which has been made possible by improved medical services and environmental conditions. The other main cause, as recent events have shown, is immigration of peoples from neighbouring countries. With this enormous increase in the population has gone a decided expansion in the needs of the people for amenities. And this has been happening at a time when the financial resources of the local authori-

ties have been shrinking, or at best growing very slowly.

Increasing Expenditure

Another major factor for the increase in the expenditure of local authorities is the increasing tendency of the central government to push many duties on to the local authorities. As would be seen from the Local Government Act of 1961, many extensive functions have been thrust upon local authorities. As more and more of this is done, the total expenditure on all services increases. And ironically enough this has not always been accompanied in any substantial way by increased government subvention to the local authorities.

Added to this is the rise in the prices of most things in Ghana. Salaries and Wages have risen, and so have the prices of materials used by local authorities in their development. For some time in Ghana, although this has ceased now, local authorities were liable to pay customs duties on materials they imported and purchase tax on goods they bought for their development works, a liability from which central government departments and state corporations were exempted. The end result of all this has been an increase in the cost of services for the local authorities.

The introduction of popular representation and party politics into local government has also had the effect of increasing expenditure. Councillors voted into office are too anxious to do things to satisfy their party supporters. In their anxiety to please the electors, councillors demand more services than the local authorities are financially capable of meeting.

Candidly, there is great doubt about the viability of the new local government system, for the following reasons. The District Authority which, according to the new proposals, will be the basic local government unit, will be too large to be a government of the local people. In other words, the citizen at the local level will have very little influence on the government of his own area; and insofar as this will be so, the

District Council will be denied the interest, the support and the participation of the citizens, except perhaps those people who may be located within the headquarters of the district authority. To many people, especially those in villages far away from the headquarters of the authority, the two bodies will appear very remote and unreal.

It is true that there will be smaller local government units, but these will not be real local government institutions. The real power-house and the place where activities will actually take place will be the district authority headquarters. The smaller local government units, that is, the local, town and area councils, will have no power to levy their own taxes except those imposed by the district authority. In fact they will be mere agents of the district authority for the collection of local taxes. What is more, the smaller units will have no meaningful control over the disbursement of the revenue collected and over the determination of what services should actually be provided. True, the smaller units will have functions to perform, but these will be functions that have been entrusted to them by the district authority and not by the Constitution or an act of Parliament.

More and More Disabilities

The local, town and area councils will thus be at the beck and call of the district authority, and this is a sure way of killing local initiative and therefore local government. The town and village development committees which may be established will suffer even greater disabilities. As the White Paper on Part III of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Electoral and Local Government Reform stated, "they will not form a tier within the local government structure ... but will in each case be a voluntary association.."

And the mixing of the traditional element with the elective element, that is, the conservative and the radical elements on the councils, will not make for expeditious decision-taking and

effective administration. This happened with the Coussey local government system, and the new system is bound to be plagued by the same problem. The post-1961 system whereby traditional representation was eliminated but chiefs were made ceremonial presidents (not chairmen) of local councils was a better system. To abrogate this now and to return to the old system, whereby local councils consisted of 1/3 traditional members and 2/3 elected members, or whatever proportion may be decided on, is a retrograde step, to say the least.

If the National Assembly is not so composed, one cannot see why local and district councils, which are the primary home of democracy, should be so undemocratically constituted. That chiefs must be given a place in the government of this country is accepted, but one thinks they should not be given so large a part in the political system as to make it undemocratic. It seems it would be sufficient to reserve the ceremonial office of the President of a Council to the chief. Like Greenwood's larger councils, the District Authority and the District Council under the new system will contain within their administrative areas mutually antagonistic traditional authorities, who may bring to the council their age-old traditional disputes, much to the detriment of the rest of the community. And the fear that development projects undertaken by the district authority may not be evenly distributed over the whole area would discourage citizens from paying their local taxes. Just as Greenwood's structure contained the seeds of its own destruction so would the new system.

What, then, Should be Done?

Having in a way condemned the new local government system, the next thing is for me to propose an alternative. Obviously this cannot be done completely here, but basically I would like to see a local government system which gives substantial power to the local people to govern themselves, and which at the same time provides the necessary conditions for an effective and efficient administration of services for

the people. The two goals can be simultaneously attained. I suggest that the new decentralization system be looked at again. It is being too hurriedly pushed through and I do not think it has received adequate examination by the public, or even by the present civilian government who have to work it.

Local government in Africa is at the cross-roads. On the one hand, the demands imposed upon it are growing rapidly; on the other, its financial and administrative ability to satisfy these demands is weak. As I see it, the way out of this impasse is not further structural re-organisation of the local government system, but making available the necessary conditions to the time-tested institutions to do the job. People in this country have too frequently resorted to structural re-organisation, as the panacea for the failure of organisations to do their work. As has been proved several times in recent years there is usually no marked improvement in the performance of the newly established institutions, which event should by now have shown that the fault in many cases does not lie with the structural arrangements but elsewhere. It is our duty to find where else the fault lies, and not always to take the line of least resistance.

It is hoped that what has been said above has succeeded in convincing readers that local government has an important role to play in the building of our nation. It has already made some contribution to this task, and given favourable conditions it can do more. I should like to end by appealing to all those who have something to do with local government to handle it with care. Our past records have shown that we have been a bit careless with it. Even now we do not seem to be according it even the recognition it deserves. And I should warn that we do this to our peril.



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